

AN INTRODUCTION TO

*Three Cups of Tea*

*Three Cups of Tea* is the true story of one of the most extraordinary humanitarian missions of our time. In 1993, a young American mountain climber named Greg Mortenson stumbled into a tiny village high in Pakistan's beautiful and desperately poor Karakoram Himalaya region. Ill, exhausted, and depressed after a failed attempt to scale the summit of K2, Mortenson regained his strength and his will to live thanks to the generosity of the people of the village of Korphe. Before he left, Mortenson made a vow that would profoundly change both the villagers' lives and his own—that he would return and build them a school.

The book traces how Mortenson kept this promise (and many more) in the high country of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Mortenson was up against considerable odds. Not only is the region remote and dangerous, it is also a notorious breeding ground for Al Qaeda and Taliban terrorists. In the course of his work, Mortenson was kidnapped and threatened with death; he endured local rivalries, deep misunderstandings, jealousy, and corruption, not to mention treacherous roads and epic weather. What kept him going was his passionate belief that balanced, non-extremist education, for boys and girls alike, is the most effective way to combat the violent intolerance that breeds terrorism. To date, Mortenson's Central Asia Institute has constructed fifty-five schools, and the work goes on.

Mortenson initially approached Karakoram as a climber and he never lost the mountaineer's appreciation for the region's austere beauty and incredible physical challenges. His coauthor David Oliver Relin deftly evokes high-altitude landscapes haunted by glaciers, snow leopards, and the deaths of scores of climbers. As Mortenson transformed himself from down-and-out climbing bum to the director of a humanitarian enterprise, he came to appreciate more and more deeply the struggles that people of the

region endure every day—struggles that have intensified with the recent explosion of war and sectarian violence.

In the course of this narrative, readers come to know Mortenson as a friend, a husband and father, a traveling companion, a son and brother, and also as a flawed human being. Mortenson made enemies along the way and frustrated his friends and family. Relin does not shy away from depicting the man's exasperating qualities—his restlessness, disorganization, sleeplessness, and utter disregard for punctuality. But Mortenson never asks others to make sacrifices that he himself has not already made time and again.

The war-torn mountains of Pakistan and Afghanistan appear in the news as the site of terrorist training camps, Al Qaeda hide-outs, and fierce religious extremism. In *Three Cups of Tea*, Mortenson and Relin take readers behind the headlines to reveal the true heart and soul of this explosive region and to show how one man has made a difference.

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. There is a telling passage about Mortenson's change of direction at the start of the book: "One evening, he went to bed by a yak dung fire a mountaineer who'd lost his way, and one morning, by the time he'd shared a pot of butter tea with his hosts and laced up his boots, he'd become a humanitarian who'd found a meaningful path to follow for the rest of his life." What made Mortenson particularly ripe for such a transformation? Has anything similar happened in your own life?
2. Relin gives a "warts and all" portrait of Mortenson, showing him as a hero but also as a flawed human being with some exasperating traits. Talk about the methods Relin chose to write about Mortenson's character—his choice of details, his perspective, the way he constructs scenes. Is Mortenson someone you'd like to get to know, work with, have as a neighbor or friend?

3. At the heart of the book is a powerful but simple political message: we each as individuals have the power to change the world, one cup of tea at a time. Yet the book powerfully dramatizes the obstacles in the way of this philosophy: bloody wars waged by huge armies, prejudice, religious extremism, cultural barriers. What do you think of the “one cup of tea at a time” philosophy? Do you think Mortenson’s vision can work for lasting and meaningful change?

4. Have you ever known anyone like Mortenson? Have you ever had the experience of making a difference yourself through acts of generosity, aid, or leadership?

5. The Balti people are fierce yet extremely hospitable, kind yet rigid, determined to better themselves yet stuck in the past. Discuss your reactions to them and other groups that Mortenson tries to help.

6. After Haji Ali’s family saves Greg’s life, he reflects that he could never “imagine discharging the debt he felt to his hosts in Korphe.” Discuss this sense of indebtedness as key to Mortenson’s character. Why was Mortenson compelled to return to the region again and again? In your opinion, does he repay his debt by the end of the book?

7. References to paradise run throughout the book—Mortenson’s childhood home in Tanzania, the mountain scenery, even Berkeley, California, are all referred to as “paradise.” Discuss the concept of paradise, lost and regained, and how it influences Mortenson’s mission.

8. Mortenson’s transition from climbing bum to humanitarian hero seems very abrupt. However, looking back, it’s clear that his sense of mission is rooted in his childhood, the values of his parents, and his relationship with his sister Christa. Discuss the various facets of Mortenson’s character—the freewheeling mountain climber, the ER nurse, the devoted son and brother, and the leader of a humanitarian cause. Do you view him as continuing the work his father began?

9. “I expected something like this from an ignorant village mullah, but to get those kinds of letters from my fellow Americans made me wonder whether I should just give up,” Mortenson remarked after he started getting hate mail in the wake of September 11. What were your reactions to the letters Mortenson received?

10. Mortenson hits many bumps in the road—he’s broke, his girlfriend dumps him, he is forced to build a bridge before he can build the school, he puts on weight and drives his family crazy. Discuss his repeated brushes with failure and how they influenced your opinion of Mortenson and his efforts.

11. The authors write that “the Balti held the key to a kind of uncomplicated happiness that was disappearing in the developing world.” This peaceful simplicity of life seems to be part of what attracts Mortenson to the villagers. Discuss the pros and cons of bringing “civilization” to the mountain community.

12. A lot of the book is about fitting into a foreign culture. Discuss your own experiences with foreign cultures—things you have learned, mistakes you have made, misunderstandings you have endured.

13. Did the book change your views toward Islam or Muslims? Consider the cleric Syed Abbas and also the cleric who called a fatwa on Mortenson. Syed Abbas implores Americans to “look into our hearts and see that the great majority of us are not terrorists, but good and simple people.” Discuss this statement. Has the book inspired you to learn more about the region?